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ABSTRACT

It is a widely held perception in this country that private schools are superior to public schools. This digest examines school size and school culture as they relate to the high quality of education in private schools. The average private school is about half the size of the average public school. Reflecting Tonnies' (Ferdinand Tonnies, 1887) conception of "gemeinschaft" institutions, small private schools exhibit distinctive school cultures based on shared purposes, personal loyalties, and common sentiments. The large public school serves widely diverse stakeholders that rarely come together to develop local educational goals. Consequently, public schools are generally held accountable to school district or state goals, which tend to be quantitative and are addressed by technical solutions. While public schools must reflect diverse community sentiments, private schools are free to establish their own sentiments and actively profess them to students through institutional rituals and traditions. These institutional beliefs and customs are actively supported by parents, alumni, and teachers. Such shared sentiments may be part of the reason that good teachers remain in private schools, accepting salaries significantly lower than those in public schools. Many experts favor smaller schools over consolidated megaschools, and connect educational quality to a sense of community. But American public school leadership continues to build large schools in pursuit of cost effectiveness and curriculum diversity. Such strategies may be sacrificing positive school culture and meaningful educational reform. Contains 14 references. (SV)

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ERIC DIGEST

by George E. Conway

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Small Scale and School Culture: The Experience of Private Schools

by George E. Conway

It is a widely held public perception that the private schools in this country are superior to public schools. The National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) completed by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics in 1988 describes the public's opinion of private schools. According to NELS, students in nonpublic schools do more homework, watch less TV, and have higher educational goals than their public school counterparts. Other statistical reports document that 44.6 percent of parents with children in public schools say they would enroll their children in a private school if there were no financial obstacle. Also, public school parents are four times more likely to be dissatisfied with their child's school (Benson & McMillen, 1991).

With this level of public respect for private schooling, investigators have for some time tried to identify characteristics of private schools that public schools could develop in order to increase public satisfaction. This digest will examine only two of several possible factors: school size and school culture.

The Smallness Factor

Although private school classes are generally smaller than those in most public schools, studies on the effects of reducing class size have yielded mixed results (Slavin, 1990). In the absence of clear evidence supporting the benefits of small *class* size, investigators have looked for other factors to explain the enduring image of success private schools enjoy.

This search has led some researchers to consider the effect of *school* size on the quality of life within the schools. The average public school is about twice as large as the average private school. Large school size compounds the difficulties that confront children and youth—from poor attitudes about school, to substance abuse, to achievement levels (Fowler, 1992; Page, 1990; 1991). What is less well understood is how the comparatively small size of most private schools might assist in creating a positive culture.

The School Culture Factor—Gesellschaft versus Gemeinschaft

In 1887, Ferdinand Tönnies, a German sociologist and philosopher, drew a distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of institutions. His distinction may be relevant to the experience of private schools:

- *gesellschaft*—an association of people that is based primarily on the members' rational pursuit of their own self–interests.
- *gemeinschaft*—an association of people that is based primarily on shared purposes, personal loyalties, and common sentiments (Johnson, 1990).

While Tönnies' concepts were developed to describe the momentous social transformations leading to the modern era, the notions of shared purposes, personal loyalties, and common sentiments speak to the distinctive school cultures that emerge in small private schools.

Shared Purposes

Large public schools often serve a widely diverse group of families residing within a single enrollment district. Rarely do these groups come together as a single community to discuss the purposes or goals of the school to which they all send their children. In the absence of clearly defined and shared intentions, teachers and administrators feel the greatest pressures for accountability to goals set by their local school districts or state departments of education. These goals tend to be expressed in concrete, quantitative terms: academic achievement scores, attendance rates, and dropout statistics. Technical solutions are sought to raise achievement scores, compel children to come to school, and keep them coming until they graduate.

An example of how such "gesellschaft" solutions can fall short can be seen in the way early elementary educators often have attempted to promote students' self–esteem. Most schools recognize the role of self–esteem in the educational success or failure of children, especially in the elementary schools. However, too often, efforts to nurture self–esteem—undertaken without clearly expressed community purposes—end up simply directing children's attention to their own inner gratification, thus encouraging narcissism. Katz (1993) suggests that efforts to increase self–esteem be sensitive to cultural differences of families, and be grounded in developing children's competence and their contributions to the group rather than in self–preoccupation and consumerism.

Personal Loyalties

Personal loyalty, a kind of faithfulness or bond among people within an institution, seems to be at the heart of the "gemeinschaft" school. These personal loyalties or feelings of connectedness are most readily formed in small schools (Ornstein, 1991). When students and parents feel they know the teachers and school leaders, and are known by them, and feel that teachers care about the students, the students perform better (Berlin and Cienkus, 1989).

Certainly for the adults, too, personal loyalties are important. Studies of teaching conditions in private schools suggest that the gemeinschaft culture of private schools might arise from the interactions of teachers—who are empowered and highly valued by the institution—with the parents, students, and the school's leadership. Teachers in small private schools are neither "invisible [n]or anonymous," and they play important roles in curriculum development, in academic and personal advising of students, and in the extracurricular activities of the school (Powell, 1990).

Common Sentiments

The process by which institutional sentiments are shared with those within the institution is precisely where the gesellschaft–gemeinschaft distinction is most evident. Essentially, public schools are asked to reflect the diversity of the community's sentiments, whereas private schools are free to establish their own sentiments and actively profess

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them to those who enroll. Private schools transmit what they consider worthy to new teachers, parents, and students through institutional rituals and traditions (e.g., chapel services, honor codes, and so forth). Most private school teachers report they have a sense of shared institutional values and they believe their colleagues feel them as well (McMillen, Rollefson, & Benson, 1991). These sentiments are not apt to change very quickly, either. The well established private school usually enjoys the support of the parents and alumni for maintaining its institutional beliefs and customs despite the vicissitudes of public sentiments. There is a kind of tacit understanding present among the school staff and parents: because they choose the private school and pay tuition, it is fair to say the people who enroll their children in private schools embrace, or at least accept, the school's values. In contrast, public schools are often required to respond to changing public opinion and diverse sentiments; thus, they may be perceived—fairly or unfairly—as committed only to accepting the diversity of their students' cultural backgrounds and standing for no specific set of traditions (Johnson, 1990).

Students are not the only ones influenced by the shared sentiments of the "gemeinschaft" school. One of the most curious phenomena in private schools is that although teacher pay in private schools lags significantly behind that of their public school colleagues, the quality of the private school faculty is believed to be very high. Why should private schools seem to "pay less and get more" instead of "getting what they pay for"? The answer may lie in how the school impresses on the teacher common sentiments about teaching. Research shows that most teachers upon entering the profession do not fundamentally differ in purpose; however, the culture of the private school apparently helps shape the individual teacher professionally and makes good teaching not only possible "but more likely" (Johnson, 1990).

This brings us back to an earlier point: small class size alone does not guarantee good teaching. Unless a teacher learns to take advantage of the small class size through instructional techniques that are possible only in small groups, no significant gain in student achievement takes place. If, for example, a teacher only lectures, the class size seems inconsequential (Slavin, 1990). It is unclear how the private school teacher, without extensive teacher training programs, learns techniques small school and class size make possible, but it may have something to do with the school culture within which the teacher is working. If so, small *school* size (as a factor in strengthening shared purposes, personal loyalties, and common sentiments) may supersede small *class* size as an influence in the private school experience.

Ask the Experts

Educational research is not the only source of evidence that could lead to the conclusion that private schools enjoy their positive image because they are generally small institutions built upon shared purposes, personal loyalties, and common sentiments—an atmosphere that shapes the adults who teach as much as the children who learn within them. In addition to a literature search on this subject, one could do as Mayor Koch once did in his effort to improve the New York City Public Schools. When the mayor assembled city private school heads for advice, they were unanimous in their recommendation: reduce school size (Kane, 1992). Recently, a group of six experts in the field of education were asked the same question and gave the same answer: the majority favored small schools or alternative groups of small schools over consolidated megaschools, and they all connected quality education to a sense of community (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1992). But American public school leadership continues to build large schools in pursuit of cost-effectiveness and curriculum diversity. By pursuing these strategies, however, we may be sacrificing positive school culture and meaningful educational reform.

Questions

Several questions arise when viewing schools through the framework used here. First, because it seems so clear that large size mitigates against the features of "gemeinschaft" and that private schools are usually half the size of public schools, could educational improvement be aided by building public schools on the smaller scale of most private schools? Second, while small size is a distinguishing characteristic of private schools, other factors such as freedom to establish admission standards and freedom from many state regulations are also characteristics of private schools. To what extent might small public schools' work be facilitated by a loosening of bureaucratic restrictions? We may never be able to answer such questions with certainty. Observers like Cusick (1983) point to the individualism (of "gesellschaft" institutions) as a fundamental commitment of U.S. schools. Whether or not such commitments militate against the emergence of smaller, more responsive public schools is unclear.

There are complex issues involved in these questions. The experience of comparatively smaller private schools cannot, however, be ignored as Americans continue to develop institutions that can respond to a diverse population whose interests in schooling vary widely.

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